

# Iconogenesis and Iconoclasm

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**Introduction:** Man in nature cannot live without symbolism represented in different sizes, shapes, patterns, symmetries, shades, colours and so on. However, in religious context, after the advent of Christianity and Islam, a phenomenon of systematic and methodical breaking, destroying and demolishing icons, sculptures, images, paintings and even the places of worship of other believers, simply dubbing them as pagans, infidels, heathens, kafirs, and so on started. Thus, in 7<sup>th</sup> century middle witnessed an extensive mass destruction of idols and places of worship with the advent of Islam. There was a movement in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries against the usage of images in religious worship in churches of the East. The Islamic onslaught on eastern nations (now south Asian) has completely changed the picture. The aggression of Christianity on old European, American and African counties has resulted in, perhaps, the total elimination of native art and architectural forms.

If the standard works, reference books and encyclopedias on art, architecture, sculpture etc., are consulted a clear western bias against east could be found<sup>1</sup>. Though, the eastern counterparts are appreciated where required, generally, the western ones are held supreme, absolutely paramount and so on. They are also projected as the saviours, custodians and masters of art, architecture, sculpture etc. But, their iconoclast mite is not mentioned. How the artistic genius, talents, capabilities and features of these iconoclasts, incendiaries and iconomachists are eulogized, applauded and projected like anything against the idolaters, iconolaters and image worshippers. This, paradoxical, inconsistent antithetical and contradictory condition, is studied here critically to understand the psyche behind it and present the facts.

**The Semantics of Icon, Iconogenesis, Iconoclasm etc:** The word *Icon* is derived from the Greek *eiko* = be like or *eikon* = image, thus denotes image, statue, painting, mosaic, portrait or any symbolic representation. From which the following connected words and expressions are formed and used in the context. Mainly the Oxford English Dictionary is consulted.

<sup>1</sup> The expressions “eastern” and “western” are used for understanding purposes just like “Oirient” and “Occident” etc., in the context.

**Iconogenesis** connotes the artistic and skillful ability of man to create or produce icons of different sizes, shapes, colours and so on to represent his view point or others view point.

**Iconoclasm** (*icon+klastic, klao = break*) connotes the exactly opposite qualities to break, destroy and demolish any icon, because of his **miso-iconism** or **iconophobia**. **Miso-iconism** is the mental attitude of exhibiting utter contempt towards and hatred against icons.

**Iconophobia** is the fear of icons on any reason.

**Iconoclast** is a person who breaks images especially one who took part in movement in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries against the usage of images in religious worship in churches of the East.

**Iconomachy** is war against use of images in connection with worship.

**Iconostasis** is the screen separating sanctuary from main body of church and on which icons are placed.

**Iconography** is an illustration of subject by drawings or figures, book whose essence is pictures, treatise on pictures or statuary.

**Iconology** is the study of icons in any sense.

**Iconolatriy** is the worship or veneration of icons.

Under worst psychological conditions, man in spite of his stature and status has exhibited these qualities leading to many battles, wars and conflicts. Time, place and circumstances may change, but the underlying principles operate on the same lines achieving their respective goals.

**The Hypocrisy of Western Art Scholars, Critics etc:** The encyclopedias and books on Art and Architecture adorning the shelves of any school, college, research institute or public libraries never take the cognizance of the iconoclastic mentality of the western religions. While Idolatry is condemned, degraded and blasphemed as a great vice on the earth than any other vice, crime, immorality, corruption or debauchery, prevalent of such idolatry exhibited in Marylatry, Dargahlatry, Bibliolatry, Quranlatry (qara = read), Mosquelatry, calligraphy, tomblatry etc., are silently ignored and not discussed at all in their scholarly works. They do not care to take note of the incongruous and contradictory attitude of iconoclast, iconophobic, anti-idolatry and destroyers of places of worship of

other believers having too much love for art and architecture going on creating such artistic exhibits.

**Can hater and destroyer of art create art?**

**Can iconoclast produce icons?**

**Can demolishers of temples build churches and mosques?**

**How the hatred factor becomes an object of worship in their represented form?**

These are the crucial questions should be answered honestly by any art expert, critic, professional, consultant etc. But, unwittingly, they say YES! Therefore, It becomes perhaps a fit case for psychologists to conduct research and others diagnosis the pathology and pathogenesis of such double-personalities.

**Conceptualization of Iconoclasm:** The concept of hatred towards idols / images evolves from

- having exclusive theological concepts,
- representation of such ideas into selective symbols
- restrictive idolization of such symbols at one side
- glorification of their idols and brewing abhorrence towards others.
- converting such antipathy into verbal violence
- ultimately turning it into physical violence against similar things of others,
- leading to break, destroy, demolish or raze down the idols / images of others.

For justify such theological violence, the other Gods are characterized as Satan, demons, evils, devils, monsters etc. Since childhood days, such indoctrination starts so that when they grow up the hatred also grows up with the gradation of social, economic and political status, but faithfully works at all levels. The terminology used in the context has to be analyzed carefully.

**1. Pagan** - Latin *paganus* = belonging to country (*pagus* = country), thus a pagan is an unenlightened person (paganism, paganization).

**2. Heathen** - *heath* = bare flat waste land, thus belonging such land in contrast to holy land, thus, an heathen is one who is neither Christian, Jewish, nor Mohammedan (heathenism, heathenize).

**3. Gentile** - non-Jewish

**4. Kafir** - *kufu* = unclean, thus a person who is unclean, non-believer (kufu, kafiri, kafirdom). **Budhshikan** an iconoclast is eulogized.

**5. Paynim** - *paganismus* from *pagan*, thus a pagan is a unbeliever, especially Mohammedan

**6. Pantheist** - *pan* = everywhere + *theos* = god, doctrine that God is everything and everything God (pantheism).

**7. Polytheist** - *poly* = many + *theist* = believer of God, thus, believer and worshipper of many Gods (polytheism).

**8. Animist** - a believer in the doctrine of the *anima mundi* (that phenomena of animal are produced by an immaterial soul); attribution of living soul to inanimate objects and natural phenomena; spiritualism as opposed to materialism (*L.anima* = life, soul). (spiritualism, animism).

**9. Heretic:** *G.hairesia* means choice or having contrary opinion, heretic / *hairetikos* is one who holds an unorthodox opinion in the matter of religion.

particularly against Christianity ( heresy, heresiologist, heresiologist etc)

**10. Infidel:** *L.infidelis* = unfaithful, thus a disbeliever in religion or adherent of religion opposed to Christianity from Jewish or Mohammedan point of view

**11. Satanist:** Worshipper of Satan / Saitan demon, devil, etc., denoted to the believers of other religious groups with contempt, hatred and disparagement.

Thus, it can easily be seen how the believers of one God are made to think about other God and believers. This exclusiveness has made them to belittle, disparage and denigrate others just by using such words in spite of their scholarship, intellectualism, professionalism, status and so on.

**Iconoclasm of Christianity:** Christian theologians trace God sanctioned Iconoclasm to Jehovah's Ten commandments. St. Bernard had advocated prohibition of images in churches. However, the Christianity is replete with symbolic representation of everything. In fact, Christianity has the dubious distinction of appropriating the symbols of many ancient civilizations, of which many exterminated by Christianity itself and presenting as Christian suppressing the historical facts.

**"Later militant Protestantism destroyed the sculptures of churches as did the French Revolution because of a series of religious, political, emotional, or social relationships between these images and some enemy. And in our own day we have witnessed more than once the systematic destruction of visual images, associated with various aspects of the "cult of personality." All of these activities have acquired a more or less fully formulated theoretical justification, but almost always after the fact, not as an intellectual proportion. In most of these instances it**

***seems as though a "natural" life of representations goes on until something in the culture, a precise historically defianable event or a sublimated instinct of some sort, suddenly erupts and destroys images, only to have them come back after the storm is over.***"<sup>2</sup>

Catholic Encyclopedia<sup>3</sup> notes that it has been represented as an effect of Muslim influence. A more probable origin is traced in the opposition to picture that had existed among the early converts. In the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, several Bishops, Constantine of Nacolia in Pyrygia, Theodosius of Ephesus, Thomas of Claudiopolis and others had the iconoclast views. A Nestorian Bishop, Xenaes of Herapolis, was a conspicuous forerunner of the Iconoclasts (Hardouin, IV, p.306). It was when this party got the ear of the Emporer Leo III (the Isaurian, 716-741) that the persecution began. All images ilke an invention of the pagans - are in fact idols, as shown by Ex.20.45; Deut.5.8; John.4.24; Rom.1.23-25 of Bible. To quote Exodus,

***"Thou shall not make to thyself a graven thing nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or on the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth; thou shall not adore them nor serve them; I am the Lord thy God, mighty and jealous"*** (Exodus 20.4).

Iconoclasts (Breakers of images) was the name given to the powerful party, which set itself against the religious usage of images, and disturbed the peace of church during the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>4</sup>. So violent was the dispute that Emperor Leo III issued an edict dealing images to be idols and forbidden by the Commandment as recorded in Exodus as mentioned above and ordered all such images to be destroyed<sup>5</sup>. Joseph Lewis traces the origin of the prohibition of image making and worshipping to the belief in sympathetic magic, sorcery and witchcraft. Shadows, reflections and images are cited as examples developed out of such

iconoclasm<sup>6</sup>. Some idea of the fanaticism that prevailed in this matters may be gathered from the "Acts of the General Assembly", July 29, 1640. At a meeting in Aberdeen, there was passed an "Act anent the demolishing the idolatrous monuments", and worded as follows<sup>7</sup>:

***"For as much as the Assembly is informed that in divers places of this kingdom, and specifically in the north parts of the same, many idolatrous monuments erected and made for religious worship, are yet extant, such as Crucifixes, images of Christ, Mary and the saints departed, Ordaines and said monuments to be taken down, demolished and destroyed, and that with all convenient diligence"***.

Hence, it is evident that such iconoclasm must have turned against others leading to selective iconoclasm. In India, historians, research scholars and

other intellectuals are allergetic to point out the iconoclastic attitude of Christians. Every myth floated by the Christians unfortunately carry the fact of their demolition of temples. St. Thome, St. Thomas Mount, Parangimalai, Velanganni, and so many churches in Kerala and Goa built have their own records behind to tell the truth.

**Islamic Iconoclasm:** Islamic traditions prohibit all forms of creation and exhibition of the so called art forms, sculptures and idols. However, later, they encouraged calligraphical and mosque forms to satisfy the needs of art-loving Muslims. Particularly, destroying the places of worship of others and building mosque on the same spots had become a sanctified, glorious and hallowed act.

Oleg Grabar relates Byzantine iconoclasm with Islam. According to him, the contemporaneity of the rise of Islam with Byzantine iconoclasm also led to a consideration of the political aspects of a presumed Muslim prohibition of representation of living beings or art forms<sup>8</sup>.

There have been many instances of wholesale destruction of temples, images and persecution of

<sup>2</sup> Oleg Grabar, ***The Formation of Islamic Art***, Yale University Press, USA, 1973, p.77.

<sup>3</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol.VII, Robert Appleton Company, 1910, USA.

<sup>4</sup> James McGovern, ***The Manual of the Holy Catholic Church***, Chicago, USA, 1906.

<sup>5</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia, Iconoclasm, Vol.VII, p.620.

<sup>6</sup> The Ten Commandments, The Truth Seeker Co.Inc., USA, 1946, pp.117-172).

<sup>7</sup> James Hastings, ***Encyclopedia of Religion & Ethics***, "Art", USA, Vol.I, p.854.

<sup>8</sup> Oleg Grabar, ***The Formation of Islamic Art***, Yale University Press, USA, 1973, p.75.

their believers recorded by the iconoclasts themselves faithfully with pride. The best known event of this kind was the edict of Yazid in 721, according to which all religious images were to be destroyed<sup>9</sup>. Even Muslim chronicles in India characterize as to how many Muslim rulers were proud of destroying so many idols or temples during their jihads.

Quran specifically gives many injunctions to deal with idolaters and idols. **Budhshiks** as they are eulogized are iconoclasts destroying the idols and images of kafirs. The recent destruction of Bamiyan Buddhas, Statue of Kanishka and other artifacts at Kabul museum is a current evidence to vouchsafe. And Mullah Omar, who ordered for destructions never, minced the words. Rahimullah Yusufzai, a Pakistani columnist aptly noted about the destruction and the warning given by other countries:

***"A senior Taliban spokesman Abdul Hye Mutmain argued that Islamic teaching rather than the concerns of other nations and people guided his Islamic regime's policies. He also reminded that Afgans as practicing Muslims were against all idols and, being the sons of Mahomood Ghaznavi who attacked India 17 times and destroyed statues placed in Somnath and other temples, it was in their genes to stop idolatrous practices. Another senior Taliban official spoke for many his colleagues when he remarked that they were more concerned about pleasing Allah by destroying statues than take note of objections by ordinary mortals"*** Rahimullah Yusufzai, ***A Question of Tolerance***, an article published in the opinion column of The News International dated March 4, 2001, the English daily of the biggest chain of Jang group of newspapers, Karachi ironically owned by a Mujahir family of New Delhi!

**Iconophobia:** The fear of Icons / Idols has been ingrained not only in the minds of Semitic believers, but also that of their Gods. Jehovah equivocally orders not to place any idol in front of him or create any idol. Allah gives injunctions to idolaters and threatens them with fire of hell. Mohammed showed the way by destroying the 360 idols kept at Ka'aba.

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<sup>9</sup> Oleg Grabar, ***The Formation of Islamic Art***, Yale University Press, USA, 1973, p.89.

Hastings (Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics), Joshua Trachtenberg (Jewish Magic and Superstition), Frazer (Golden Bough), Joseph Lewis (The Ten Commandments) and others have clearly pointed out as to how the fear of idols and fear of image making had been so ingrained in their minds which prohibited idol making and thus leading to iconoclasm. As idol or image making is connected with sorcery and witchcraft applied to kill the opponents, they were made to fear the idols at all times.

The early Church Fathers condemned the making of images and image worship in accordance with the provisions of the second commandment of the ten commandments of Bible. Celsus exposes that the Christians could not tolerate either temples, altars or images". Origen stated that it was on the basis of this commandment that Christians abhorred all worship and use of images, and added that "it is not possible at the same time to know God and to address prayers to images".

In Canon XXXVI, of Synod of Elvira (300 CE), it is ordered:

"It is ordained that pictures are not to be placed in churches, nor is that which is worshipped and adored to be painted on the walls"

The Hebrew iconophobia acted vigorously though Christianity resulting in the destruction of many valuable art pieces. The Muslims too faithfully followed the commandment, which is perhaps too well known to be repeated. However, later, both compromised with idolatry too some extent, as they had to satisfy their respective believers, however, the hatred against the idolatry of others doubled with vigour.

**Subjective and Objective Symbolism:** Any subject (study, theme, issue, matter, point or proportion) cannot be understood without object (manifestation, entity, article, substance, matter or character). The subject-object cognition plays an important role in art and architecture. Man has always tried to depict everything that is subjected to his imagination, whether it is within in his time and place or beyond such limits. Therefore, without objective depiction of physical, material, corporeal, real, substantial or tangible matter, he cannot convey his subjective conception to others.

If an artist wants to say about colours, sizes, shapes, patterns, forms etc., he should necessarily explain with objective examples. Even abstract ideas have to be represented in objective forms. If anybody wants to convey Allah, Jehovah, Brahma, Azur Mazda, Mahavira, Buddha or other God to others, he has to describe their characters, attributes and representative signs or symbols for

understanding. A child has to be taught that numbers are so and so, then only he cognizes, recognizes and remembers them.

Therefore, if anybody wants to oppose his subjective and objective representations, he should oppose all such perceptions, conceptions and depictions with or without similar factors pitted against each. If he puts his art forms against others with competitive spirit, then iconization increases. If he launches tirade without art forms, then iconoclasm starts.

**Iconoclasm Inspired and sanctioned by Scriptures:** Christian and Islamic fundamentalists argue and justify Iconoclasm with the support of their scriptures. They reportedly quote from Bible and Quran and assert that it is their sacred duty to destroy all the idols of the past or belonging to the unbelievers (read as non-Christians - pagans, infidels and non-Muslims - kafirs). Therefore, such scripture sanctioned iconoclasm and its background is analyzed. It is closely related to the concept and evolution of God.

**Can God be conceived, Perceived and Identified Without Symbolism?** Some fundamental concepts and questions related to God, scriptures and believers are to be defined and answered without mincing the words.

They are identified as follows. There may be more also.

- ☞ If God is One, he should have only one name.
- ☞ Then everybody should know him only with that name.
- ☞ If that God has only one religion, then there should have been only one Religion.
- ☞ If that True God revealed the True Scripture, then there should have been only one scripture.
- ☞ But, how does man know that there is only one God?
- ☞ What is One?
- ☞ How the One is only One?
- ☞ To what extent the only One is One?
- ☞ Can the Oneness be defined or measured?
- ☞ Does Unity of Godhead not imply the diversity of divinity?
- ☞ If God created man from his own image, did the God look like Man?
- ☞ How God can love one group of people and hate other people, if all people are children of God?
- ☞ How a God can have only one Last Messenger?
- ☞ How the Identity of the God and Messenger could be kept in darkness?
- ☞ Why no believer has ever claimed of seeing that only God?

The above discussion clearly proves that objective symbolism and subjective symbolism depends on each other. Nature always wants subjective symbolism translates into objective symbolism. Energy is converted into matter in such process. This is the underlying principle of iconogenesis. Thus, the opposite can be understood easily.

**The Psychology behind Iconogenesis and Iconoclasm:** The creator is interested in creating more and more icons for his and others' satisfaction. The destroyer or breaker of icons does so, according to his or others' satisfaction. Particularly, when he carries the order of his master-iconoclast, he may have to do his job without questioning. He may have a feeling how to break an idol worshipped by so many people or how to demolish a beautiful temple and so on, but the moment, such thought is replaced by the hate psychology supported by their theology, destruction is carried on with sanctified spirit. As iconoclasm is glorified as a sacred duty that is suitably rewarded by their God, they perform such ordained obligation with obeisance. The issue boils down to analysis of violence and non-violence.

**The Psychology of Violence and Non-violence:** Violence and aggression are two faces of brute that is grown with hardened hatred, conditioned contempt and acrimonious animosity against targeted people and their symbols. Such attitude and behaviour do not come to any personality, unless they are taught, nurtured and developed since childhood or at later date with definite indoctrination. ***Violence is, any action initiated with intention to hurt or injure other physically or psychologically and thus, the most immoral crime committed creating disturbance among people groups, outraging all social norms and decency leading to injustice inflicted on humanity<sup>10</sup>.*** The intensity of brutality, savagery and severity of violence has been the out come of trained, brainwashed and conditioned minds. That too, when it is conceived, nurtured, implemented and perpetuated in the name of God, religion and scripture, it is the most inexplicable heinous offense against humanbeings. Again, when it is launched against meek, mild and innocent people, it is the worst form of barbarity to the core.

Thus, the psychology of violence unmasks the mindset of the believer who wages holy war or jihad

<sup>10</sup> Leory H. Delton, **The Psychology of Non-violence**, Pergamon Press Inc., USA, 1974.

against the so-called non-believers by calling names from their dictionary of theology. It exposes as to how the cruelty of God is transferred, transplanted and acted through the equally cruel believers and followers of him. It reveals the scriptural sanction of violence in the name of spreading the Word of God or Good News to everybody.

Thus, they want to destroy all that belonged to non-believers, infidels or kafirs as decided by them. ***Theological violence and faithful aggression perpetrated with scriptural sanction and assumed divine inspiration cross all psychological barriers leading to calculated lootings, burning scriptures, orchestrated iconoclasm, dogmatic demolitions, artistic vandalism, neurotic incendiarism, beastly molestations, blood curling infanticides and inhuman genocide.*** But the indulging warriors cannot wipe out everything as they think, because they too know very well that matter can neither be created nor destroyed. However, history tells how the Mayans, Incas and Aztecs were totally exterminated with their civilizations almost breaking down with their structures and cities. In extreme cases, they become frustrated and try to take over, modify or super impose the existing things with external embellishment.

Physical violence and verbal violence had been the part of these crusaders depending upon the people groups and places where they were operating. In fact, the verbal violence had been the worst form than the physical violence.

On the other hand, the psychology of non-violence is gentleness, lenience and mildness nature of man inculcated with tenderness, grace and tolerance. It is not preached, but followed and practiced in thought and action. It spreads goodwill, peace and happiness on the earth, embraces all with love and compassion and unifies to Cosmos for eternity. Thus, ***non-violence can be defined as the refined and conditioned mental status of non-allowance of any thinking that may cause or likely to cause physical or psychological injury to any other living things, including human-beings.*** Its main characteristic is self-suffering and suffering for others. Getting slapping on both cheeks, bearing all beatings, receiving blows, accepting punches and withstanding lashes without raising a hand against. Without understanding the significance, the aggressors may exploit the condition of such people, but in long run, they are the losers and the sufferers the victors.

**Destructiveness:** It is a tendency, usually on the part of a child, to express underlying frustration by aggressive attacks on objects.

**Frustration:**

1. blockage or thwarting of goal-directed behaviour
2. An unpleasant state of tension, anxiety, and heightened sympathetic activity resulting from blockage or thwarting.

**Frustration - aggression hypothesis:** the assumption that frustration always leads to some kind of aggressive reaction whether explicit or implicit.

Frustration tolerance: the ability to suffer being thwarted without undue psychological harm.

Man by nature, is an artist. He always makes, creates and produces something. Of course, in such process, he encounters only with nature, as he tries to imitate nature. But, at many times, his over enthusiastic and selfish acts make him go against naturalistic rhythm, pattern and arrangement, there his antagonization starts not only with nature, but also with his fellow beings. Confronting, opposing and conflicting tendencies lead to destructive tendencies.

**Conclusion:** Creativity and destruction cannot go together in the realm of art. In the religious inspired destruction, the art places no role, as the creation of art is seen as the acts of Devil. Sir Cyril Burt has noted that from the time immemorial the gift of creativity has been almost as if it were divine. There is more than a grain of truth in the romance of old Euhemerus, which relates how the gods and demigods of the ancient myths were really<sup>11</sup>, "***men of pre-eminent accomplishments deified out of flattery or gratitude***". This attitude justifies such acts, because there have been artistic creations without such motivation, which the west could not recognize easily. The eastern artists, sculptors and craftsmen work for years without any expectation, name or fame. That is why their creations are still recognized and appreciated. Such creation is not inspired by the scriptures, but by the nature and the inborn urge of the involved people. Therefore, the holders of divine and revealed scriptures to demolish and destroy are something not divine and revealing. Let the iconoclasts go on demolish, artists and sculptors continue to produce more idols and create more images.

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<sup>11</sup> Sir Cyril Burt, in his introduction to the book of Arthur Koestler, ***The Act of Creation, Laurel***, USA, 1967, p.13.